'JFK' opens today

New movie opens old wounds

BY JOE DeCHICK
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Oliver Stone is rattling skeletons again.

But this time, the iconoclastic two-time Oscar-winning director is rummaging in what is, to Americans, that most sensitive of historical closets: the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

In *JFK* — the $40 million, three-hour epic opening today on more than 900 screens nationwide — the filmmaker who re-fought Vietnam in *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), roasted Reagan-era greed in *Wall Street* (1987) and resurrected rock'n'roll's *The Doors* last March, now replays that November day in Dal-

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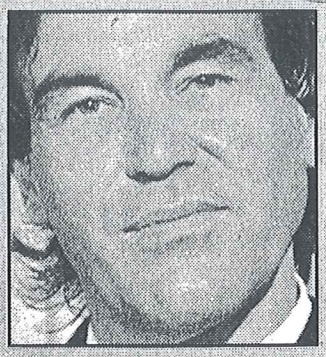
■ Today: Review of 'JFK'/B-16.
■ Sunday: Oliver Stone and JFK/Arts & Leisure.



"I feel an artist has as much right and duty to interpret history as anyone."

— Oliver Stone, director of 'JFK'

Movie

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JFK opens to the most pre-release controversy of any film since *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Stone and the film's revisionist history have been:

■ Attacked and/or analyzed by historians and conspiracy theorists.

■ Profiled and criticized in cover stories of *Life, Newsweek* and *Esquire* magazines, as well as major newspapers nationwide.

Vietnam veteran Stone, 45, says he wants *JFK* to address for the first time "why Kennedy was killed" and to confront "the big lie" of the Warren Commission report. That federal investigation concluded in 1964 that Kennedy was killed by a lone pro-Communist gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald.

Oswald a patsy?

JFK blends several conspiracy theories and boldly asserts Oswald was the patsy in a coup d'etat. The engineers: CIA-trained anti-Communists and the military-industrial complex, both threatened by Kennedy's stance on Cuba and the Soviet Union, and by his intention to pull out of Vietnam.

Stone also says the conspiracy was covered up by the FBI, the Justice Department and the Dallas police — with the connivance of Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson.

David Belin, a top investigator for the Warren Commission, denounces *JFK* as "a big lie that would make Adolf Hitler proud." Stone responds that Belin is a "frustrated prosecutor."

Tom Wicker, a *New York Times* columnist who covered the Kennedy assassination for the newspaper, writes that *JFK* treats "matters that are wholly speculative as fact and truth, in effect rewriting history."

Stone's tale is told from the viewpoint of Jim Garrison, the former New Orleans district attorney whose 1988 book, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, inspired Stone to do the movie.

Now a Louisiana appeals court judge, Garrison — played in *JFK* by Kevin Costner (*Dances With Wolves*) — assembled what he asserted was evidence of a government-implicated assassination conspiracy led by businessman Clay Shaw. Garrison unsuccessfully prosecuted Shaw in 1969 in the only trial of any suspect in the assassination case.

Prosecutor discredited

After Shaw's acquittal, Garrison was widely condemned for what were viewed as sloppy and unfair methods and tactics. In *JFK*, co-written by Garrison's editor, Za-

chary Sklar, Stone charges Garrison was discredited through government manipulation of the news media.

The charge of manipulation can cut the other way, Stone's critics point out. "This movie presents itself as more than speculation; it claims truth for itself," Wicker says.

"And among the many Americans likely to see it, particularly those who never accepted the Warren Commission's theory of a single assassin," Wicker says, "even more particularly those too young to remember Nov. 22, 1963, *JFK* is all too likely to be taken as the final, unquestioned explanation." (About 60% of the U.S. population was born after 1963, according to the 1990 Census Bureau.)

Counters Stone: "I feel an artist has as much right and duty to interpret history as anyone."

Real reels mixed in

Even Stone's visual approach to *JFK* blurs the line between fact and fiction. The docudrama's mix of stills, newsreel and archival footage, home movies and Stone-shot re-enactments is masterfully — but manipulatively — edited. To all but Kennedy-assassination buffs, it's often hard to distinguish factual images from the docu-fictional.

Ultimately, "I hope *(JFK)* blows away the Warren Commission report," Stone told the *Chicago Tribune*. "We want to make people upset, make them demand all the files that have been withheld until the year 2029 — the House Select Committee files, files from the FBI."

If that happens, Stone may be hailed as a muckraking hero.

If not, his *JFK* likely will be remembered as some sort of cynical, cinematic parlor game.